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SURVEYS OF SOCIAL NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF TRANSITION HOMES

Greg F. Parsons, Statistics Canada and Caroline Cyr, Correctional Service of Canada¹
Greg F. Parsons, Social Survey Methods Division, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Canada K1A-0T6

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INTRODUCTION

An increased awareness of serious social problems plaguing our society has, in the last two decades, led to the proliferation of a class of establishments which, to date, has received little attention from national statistical agencies. These can be referred to as social non-profit organizations. The term "social non-profit" refers to social establishments whose funding is insecure and/or function with minimal human and financial resources. These establishments can be characterized as being community based, often grass-roots, and relying heavily on volunteer support and donations. They include such organizations as food banks, shelters for the homeless, and transition homes. The latter primarily provide women victims of family violence, and their dependents, with both a safe haven from the abuse and relevant services. The increasing number of social non-profit establishments has motivated policy makers to improve their knowledge of how these organizations function and the nature of the clientele they serve.

This paper uses the Transition Home Survey (THS), recently developed at Statistics Canada, as a case study to illustrate the importance of a consultative process when planning a survey of social non-profit organizations. This is done by highlighting compromises to the initial design of the THS which resulted from consultations with Federal and Provincial/Territorial government agencies, Transition Home Associations, and representatives of individual shelters.

The Commentary section reflects on the challenges which remain in overcoming the limitations of the current THS and also presents ideas for developing a more conducive environment for the collection of data from social non-profit organizations in the future.

THE TRANSITION HOME SURVEY: ITS DRIVING FORCE

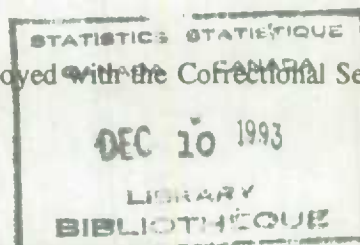
Due to the uniquely private nature of family violence, statistics on its prevalence are generally difficult to obtain and are admittedly underestimated. Notwithstanding this, it is estimated that no less than one in ten Canadian women is victim of abuse by her partner and that family violence accounts for over 60 percent of female homicides in Canada (Government of Canada, 1992). In terms of physical injury, wife assault occurs more often in Canada and the United States than all incidents of muggings, rape, and car accidents combined (Myers Avis, 1992). The recent proliferation of transition homes is evident when one considers that of the approximately 390 in operation today in Canada, about 80% of them have opened since 1980 (Statistics Canada, 1993).

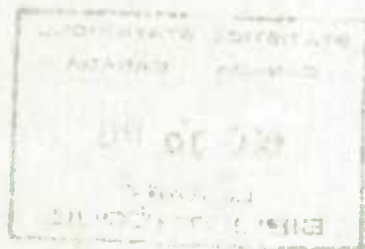
Data from a recent preliminary survey of transition homes in Canada only begins to reflect the scope of family violence. In 1992, 273 responding transition homes reported 78,429 admissions. This represents an average of 287 admissions per year, per transition home (Statistics Canada, 1993).

In response to growing concern, in 1991, the Canadian government approved funds for a four year renewal of the Family Violence Initiative (FVI), the objective of which is to improve and expand current efforts in reducing family violence in Canada. Within a coordinated interdepartmental approach, an action plan was devised targetting many fronts, from prevention and intervention to information collection and dissemination. The information requirements identified as priorities were of three general types; 1) the services currently available to victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, 2) the nature of the violence which is occurring and 3) the extent of the violence (Statistics Canada, 1990).

It was acknowledged that the sources of data concerning transition homes in Canada were generally

¹ Formerly of Statistics Canada, now employed with the Correctional Service of Canada.





inconsistent and inadequate. It was the absence of useful national statistics concerning transition homes that motivated the development of the THS.

In designing the THS, the intent was (1) to collect detailed information concerning services available in every transition home in Canada, using a year end aggregate questionnaire; and (2) to collect client-based information on the nature of the violence occurring, via standardized, aggregate client admission forms. This was viewed as the initial design.

It should be noted that a separate Statistics Canada survey, the Violence Against Women Survey, also addresses the issue of the nature of the violence committed but in addition looks at the extent of violence.

CONSULTATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT

A project team was organized to investigate the feasibility of implementing the THS based on its initial design. Given the nature of the establishments being surveyed, and the clientele being studied, the project team felt that a process of consultations with key stakeholders was warranted and would provide many benefits.

First Round of Consultations

At the first of two rounds of consultations, the project team met with representatives from Federal and Provincial/Territorial government agencies and Transition Home Associations. The main objectives of the first consultations concerned the following:

1. *Ongoing Collection Methodology*: Determine the types of data that Provincial/Territorial government agencies and/or Transition Home Associations were already collecting or planning to collect;
2. *Frame Creation*: Identify transition homes that may not be included in federal inventories; and
3. *Practicality*: Assess reactions to the proposed design.

This first round of consultations was to set the foundation for the development of a prototype strategy which would be discussed at the second round of consultations (Statistics Canada, 1992).

Ongoing Collection Method

These first consultations confirmed that ongoing collection methods, content, and definitions were not standardized across the country. It was discovered that of Canada's ten provinces and two territories, only two provincial Transition Home Associations were using a provincial standard client admission form for the transition homes in their respective provinces. Of these, only one provided copies of these forms to its respective provincial government. All other Provincial/Territorial governments received non-standardized monthly or annual accounts from transition homes in their jurisdictions. Hence, of the data sought for the THS, only partial year end aggregate data could be made available from data already collected. The nature of the client-based data elements being collected within and amongst provinces were equally inconsistent. It appeared that any attempt to gather, capture and standardize data from existing admission forms would be difficult, while the quality of the data would remain questionable.

Frame Creation

A preliminary frame was developed from separate inventories of residential facilities and transition homes, maintained by Statistics Canada and Health and Welfare Canada. Unduplicating these two files provided a list of 294 shelters. The consultative process identified an additional 119 shelters, a 40% increase.

The use of consultations as a means of improving frame coverage is not a unique strategy; however, in the case of the THS, it may have been the only means of building a virtually complete frame, given the desire of these agencies to retain some anonymity (from fear of abusers tracking down their victims). The type of networking developed amongst Transition Home Associations can only be expected when the survey frame is as small as it was in this case.

Notwithstanding these efforts to develop a complete frame, there remains the chance that a number of transition homes have been involuntarily omitted from our frame. This may have happened as a result of the existence of these facilities not being known to either Transition Home Associations, and/or Provincial/Territorial government agencies. While it is believed that the number of transition homes which may fall under this category is minimal, it is impossible to estimate its impact on frame quality.

Practicality

The reaction of representatives of Transition Home Associations to the proposed design focussed primarily on response burden for both administrators and clients. The scope of the data elements being considered for collection by the THS was much broader than that of any of the client admission forms used. Hence, additional and excessive demands would be placed on respondents.

While it was generally agreed that a national aggregate survey of services and clients would best accommodate the needs of Federal and Provincial/Territorial groups, the concerns of response burden and limited resources resulted in the decision that a one-day snapshot type survey was more feasible. Thus, it was agreed that transition homes would be asked to respond to a questionnaire on 31 March of the reference year. It would request aggregate data concerning the activities of the transition home during the previous twelve months, and a profile of the residents in the shelter on 31 March.

In an attempt to reduce the information gap imposed by these compromises, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) would collect, from a subset of homes in the universe, client-level data from a 20 percent sample of all clients in these homes during the year. The transition homes surveyed by CMHC were those funded by the Corporation under its FVI Project Haven program.

Second Round of Consultations

Based on the first round of consultations, and the decisions that ensued, an interim survey was developed which made use of a short version questionnaire. It was forwarded to all transition homes, to collect preliminary data on their population and services, and pre-test the receivability of such a survey. The outcome of this exercise, and the consultations which drove it, led to the design of a long version THS questionnaire, which was to be the focus of discussion during the second round of consultations.

Since the THS is the first survey which is specific to transition homes in Canada, there was a need to have the questionnaire as comprehensive as possible, enabling us to collect baseline data on specific areas of interest (services available, total admissions,

resources, staffing, etc.). However, reduced response burden remained an overriding factor, thus making it imperative to have a user-friendly collection vehicle, in order to maximize the response rate.

The objective of the second round of consultations was to get feedback on the draft long version questionnaire and instructions. Issues raised during this round of consultations related to the following points:

1. *Data Availability:* Determine whether the necessary resources and information are available at the time of collection;
2. *Nature of Data Sought:* Get feedback on the sensitivity of particular questions; and
3. *User friendliness:* Look for suggestions as to how the collection vehicle might be simplified to maximize response rates.

Data Availability

Transition Home Associations made it clear during the consultations that respondents had neither the resources, time nor accessibility to report on an exhaustive set of data elements. Accordingly, the content of the survey had to be considerably restricted to acknowledge the nature of the establishment surveyed. Data elements to be collected were restricted to those readily available to respondents. Hence, the majority of data was collected for only one day of the year, namely March 31, with limited aggregate data collected on annual admissions, financial resources, and staffing. This data collection could then be supplemented with that collected by CMHC.

Nature of Data Sought

Collection of data which may stereotype the resident was frowned upon by some of those consulted. Additionally, the concern of the Associations was that asking intrusive questions may undermine the anonymity that these women seek, and therefore have a detrimental impact on their usage of the transition home. Consequently, questions concerning Length of Abuse, Ethnic Background, Occupational Profile, Primary Source of Income and Educational Profile were dropped from the questionnaire.

User Friendliness

In keeping with the need to reduce response burden and strive towards maximum user friendliness, the questionnaire had to be designed in a fashion such that the time to complete it would be minimized as much as possible. This included designing the majority of questions with pre-defined check-off categories or yes/no responses. Respondents were also provided, in some cases, with the choice of providing estimated percentages of total numeric data instead of exact figures. Similarly, respondents were provided with flexibility as to the reporting period for the data collected, with the following two restrictions: the aggregate data provided could include any twelve month period as long as this period was clearly defined and maintained throughout the questionnaire; and the one-day snapshot data had to be collected for March 31.

It is clear that the consultative process had caused the scope of the THS to evolve. Though the extent of the current survey may be less ambitious than originally proposed, it better reflects the reality of transition homes. This, in turn, translates into a higher likelihood of success for the survey. One can assume that other surveys of social non-profit organizations could face similar compromises.

COMMENTARY

Though the THS has been designed to strike a balance between information needs and the constraints imposed by the nature of the establishments being surveyed and their clientele, there is general agreement that these information needs cannot best be met via a questionnaire administered once a year. It is clear that improvements are necessary.

There is a need to collect national, micro-level data of both services and clients of these establishments, at the Provincial/Territorial level. This is already being done in a number of provinces/territories. However, the data collection methods used, as well as the data elements collected, are not uniform from province to province, preventing comparative analysis. Consequently, national data remains unavailable.

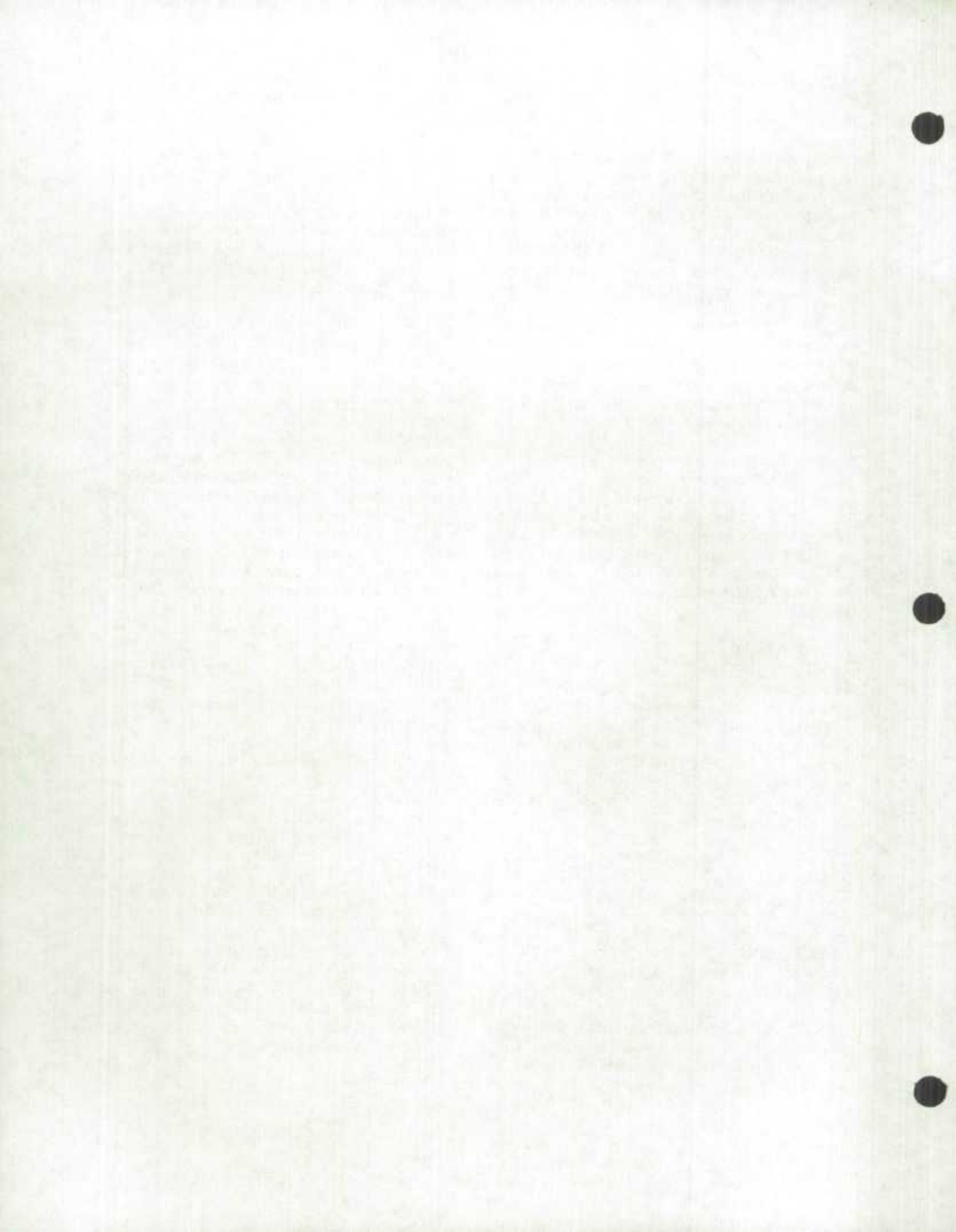
As a means of achieving this uniformity, standardized admission and separation forms are required across the country. This will inevitably entail further consultations with representatives of the transition

homes themselves who are in the best position to assess the nature of information that is available and reasonable to collect. These forms would be comprised of a minimum set of uniform data elements which provinces/territories and Transition Home Associations need for their own administrative purposes, as well as elements which would be collected solely for statistical purposes. It is reasonable to assume that the data for administrative purposes would be collected from every client while information on only a sample of clients would be needed for the remaining elements.

These forms could be sent to central Provincial / Territorial registries on a monthly basis, to be captured. A synthesis of this micro-level data could then be done at year end to produce a national statistical portrait.

While ideal, this exercise would undoubtedly require further resources which may not be available at the moment. Until such resources are made available, our current methods could be extended to collect data from transition homes on an intermittent basis. This would enable us to capture one-day snapshots at different times throughout the year, thus minimizing external factors such as seasonal fluctuations. This would entail using two questionnaires instead of one. The first one would collect data for the one-day client-based snapshots; the second one would only collect establishment-based data currently contained in the THS at year-end.

There are a several things which national statistical agencies can do to prepare for future surveys of non-profit organizations. The non-profit organizations must first recognize the value of a series of provincial and national statistics. Statistical agencies should clearly illustrate to non-profit organizations the benefits of standardized data collection. Their statistical expertise should also be made available to these organizations, to aid in the process of developing the standards required. Several Provinces/Territories have taken the lead by standardizing admission and separation forms for transition homes in their respective regions, and developing collection/capture systems to automate data access. Reaching consensus on national data collection standards will be facilitated if statistical agencies act now to take the lead rather than waiting until more Provinces/Territories have invested in their own, unique automated systems.



In conclusion, this and other surveys of social non-profit organizations will need to respect the nature of the establishments surveyed. This means that minimizing response burden will have to remain the overriding factor, imposing inevitable compromises on data collection efforts, until such a time that these non-profit social agencies gain the ranks of other well established, well resourced, social agencies. This may only be achievable if all Provinces/Territories assume responsibility for transition homes, and their

administration, and make the services they dispense a higher priority on their social agenda.

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